Title: Choosing not to be a Man: Representations of Hijras in Contemporary Indian Culture

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Synopsis

This thesis will explore representations of the hijras in contemporary Indian culture with special references to literature and films.It is my contention that while mainstream cinema does tend to homogenize the hijra identity and represent them as objects of ridicule, scorn and derogation, there are also interesting exceptions to this. Newly emerged literary texts including autobiographies, biographies and memoirs of hijras are providing a scope for exploring the complexities and subtleties of the interrelation between gender and sexuality. My study will try to reveal the dominant politics of what is permissible/ impermissible and also to provide a glimpse into the alternative politics of resistance and dissent. Popular perception holds that the hijra are the freaks of nature, very few are actually natural hermaphrodites or people in whom the male-female (ovu-testes) sexual organ is found in vestigial condition. It would thus be more appropriate to think of hijra not as a medical category but as a special group of transsexuals who often choose not to be 'a man' since they feel that their psycho-somatic orientation is feminine.

Broadly speaking the category of hijra comes under the umbrella term 'Queer'. By using this once pejorative term LGBTQK movement not only challenges our understanding of straight jacketed/ heteronormative gender roles but also include and appropriate array of alternative sexualities that proliferate outside a given heterosexual space.Hijras clearly contests such heteronormative understandings of gender, sexuality and the body. However it is also to be noted that existence of diverse gender non- conforming communities in India like Hijra, Kothi, Jogappa point out to the fact that Indian culture had long accepted presence of 'third sex' within the fold of mainstream society.

The understanding of the hijra as the Queer or belonging to the 'Third Category' is deeply rooted in the Western conceptions of Sexuality. I shall discuss on this topic in my introductory chapter tentatively named – "Contesting Sexuality? In the European Discourse from and after the Nineteenth Century".The debate between sex and gender divide had played an important role in shaping up the European moralities, customs, even laws and policies. Initially the study of sexuality emerged with the rise of bourgeoisie, keeping up with the work ethics. Finally it assumed the role of the panoptic controller, maintaining order to rule out the so called mentally/physically 'disordered' persons. Sigmund Freud in*The SexualAberrations* clarified that "inversion" was a frequent phenomenon and it was therefore impossible to regard inversion as a sign of "degeneracy". We may note here the positive changes that Freud's assumptions are bringing in, firstly the homosexuals/ inverts are not mentally degenerated, secondly there have

been a long history of homosexual relationships, and lastly, homosexuality was a matter of choice.Michel Foucault's account of a nineteenth century hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin, has helped the later critics to formulate the Queer existence that gives due importance to the choice of the individual. Most importantly it is Judith Butler's argument on constructiveness of heterosexual identities and gender as repeated stylization of the body provides us with the framework to critically analyse queer movement as an act of defiance and of celebration of self.

The first chapter it is titled-"The Instances of Queer Presence in the Ancient and Medieval Indian Literature." Religious scholars contend that the ancient Indians characterized gender by the presence or absence of procreative ability in a person. And there were three genders--- *purusa*, *stri* and *napumsaka*. *Napumsaka*or the third category marked the non-procreative mass, it included sick people, children and impotent persons. Gradually the third sex began to be associated with impotent persons only.This third category also had been variously referred in Sanskrit and Pali as *kliba*, *pandaka*, and *trtiyaprakiti*.

Ancient and Medieval Indian texts are repositories of (life) stories of ' *klibas*', '*napumsakas*', and persons deemed of third sex. Sikhandin and Brihannala in the *Mahabharata* are two such *napumsaka* characters who form important mythological and historical basis of hijra existence and validation in contemporary India.The *Kamasutra* composed between 400-200 BCE by Vatsayana provide detailed instructions ways of attaining pleasure from same sex activities and individuals of third sex.

The second chapter titled "Macaulay Minute and its Legacy till Indian Independence" is divided into two parts – "Macaulay Minute and the Criminal Acts." and "The Dissident Indians".Indian culture exalted the same-sex relationships, and had a tolerant attitude towards androgyny, the Minute through rigorous policing and forced internalization of established the heteronormative- legal- procreative relationships at the center. The Victorian morality only admitted and accepted the Malthusian couple and the aberrations were branded as criminals and the law that banned sodomy was meant to cure Indians of homosexuality. The British colonial constructions of power and subjectivity werefurther crystallized by drawing homology between sexual and political dominance: the prowess and the dominance of (British) masculinity over (Indian) femininity. This preoccupation with Indian effeminacy as a foil for British masculinity figured in thoughts and conceptions of M. K Gandhi and other nationalist leaders

The first book I would like to take up is an autobiography called *A Hijra's Life Story* by Revathi. Initially written in Tamil it is later translated into English by V. Geetha in 2010. Revathi's words critically mark the emergence of hijra voice that emerged to validate of choice of an individual against ideologies of power and oppression. Revathi's auto-biography is not only representative of hijra life and culture but is also a unique story of an individual who boldly demands equal rights as a citizen of free India of which she and her sisters are consistently denied. *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) is the biographical accounts, photographs of a hijra named Mona by Dayanita Singh along with the letters written by Mona to her publishers.These graphical and pictorial representations of gender non-conforming individuals from India allowed a unique study of transvestite individuals as representative of third sex to the Western readers of the time. And most importantly it opened up series of research and projects works in India for further study of hijras.

The other personal narrative I want to present here is that of Pratibha Sixer Rani's *An IndianKothi Speaks Out*! Pratibha is a British lesbian director who clarifies to the non-Indian readers that kothis are either transgendered women or queer men with strong personality traits ascribed to women. And, "…our sexuality varies from asexual through homosexual to bisexual and our sexual behavior in bed is much more varied than the PUCL-K report seems to suggest" (Narrain 262). Pratibha declares that exile is a recurrent theme in their lives. She goes on to quote several popular songs with exile as central motif sung by the hijras and kothis in rituals and festivals.

The fourth chapter is titled"Cinematic Representations of Hijras in Contemporary Indian Cinema". Mainstream Indian cinema generally deals which the macho-hero cross dressing for the sake of comedy. Hijras are rarely shown as they are except in some marriage song sequences. Here I am trying to locate the impact the hijra society and culture have in the mindset of the Indian audience, which is wide and varied. I have taken up three cult/ popular movies that deal with real life hijras in the very core of the cinematic story line.*Tamanna* is a 1997 Hindi film directed by Mahesh Bhatt. It presents Paresh Rawal playing the role of a hijra. The movie tries to break down the myth that hijras abduct children and castrate them in order to recruit. Tikku who is herself an abandoned hijra, here, saves a girl child and raises as her own. The second movie I want to discuss is*Welcome to Sajjanpur*, 2008, a Hindi comedy film directed by ShyamBenegal loosely based on a real life story. Kamala Jaan was elected Mayor of Katni in Madhya Pradesh in January 2000. She was first hijra Mayor.The last movie I am talking about is *Murder 2*, (2011) a Bollywood thriller film directed byMohit Suri. Dheeraj, a psychopath serial killer gets controlled by a hijra Nirmala who seeks political power. The movie presents us with yet another picture of the hijras going to the point of misusing their power to save their followers. However this movie actually depicts the scene of ceremonial castration of the hijra community which is something new for the Indian audience.

The concluding chapter deals with the understanding of the present day concern with the 'shifting relations' inside the gender discourses. This project belonging under the scholarly rubric ofgender and sex studies also incorporate the colonial, cultural and medical discourses. My intended attempt to collect firsthand interviews, testimonials and profiles will be a tribute to their hitherto disregarded voices. I sincerely hope for a paradigm shift in the near future in the conventional social outlook towards the hijra culture and liberalization of the existing norms accordingly with emergence of more researches into this as yet 'tabooed' field.

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